

## **Ensuring the Readiness of WMD First Responder Equipment**

### **By Frank Lepage**

The United States faces a continuing threat of attack with chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear or explosive weapons of mass destruction. To effectively prepare for a threat or respond to an incident, each jurisdiction must have the appropriate resources. What makes this difficult is that the equipment and technologies required for such a task are so diverse, it is unrealistic to expect every jurisdiction to be fully prepared.

To meet this critical need, in 2002, the U.S. Department of Justice launched the Prepositioned Equipment Program (PEP) that put standardized equipment pods in selected geographic areas. These pods allow for rapid deployment in the event of a terrorist attack, and contain such things as protective clothing, chemical and radiological decontamination, search and rescue, medical and communication equipment.

An important part of the program is ensuring that the first responders who will be using the equipment are trained, and that the equipment is meticulously inventoried and maintained. The Office for Domestic Preparedness (ODP) has established a comprehensive, technical assistance program for emergency responders that will fill those needs. It was created in partnership with the U.S. Army's Pine Bluff Arsenal and the Department of Defense center of expertise for chemical and biological defensive equipment production and support.

#### **The Domestic Preparedness Equipment Technical Assistance Program**

Dubbed DPETAP, the Domestic Preparedness Equipment Technical Assistance Program helps first responders select, operate and maintain their radiological, chemical and biological detection and response equipment by providing detailed technical information and hands-on operations and maintenance training.

This complex training is provided by the DPETAP Mobile Technical Assistance Teams at no cost to the jurisdiction. Each member of the 11-person team has a particular area of expertise in WMD equipment. Their combined level of knowledge makes for a team that is a tremendous powerhouse of WMD information. According to Jeff Allison, ODP's training and technical assistance director, "few groups in the country have such a repository of information."

The DPETAP program is now available to any jurisdiction that has received funding from ODP to purchase response equipment. Its program is targeted toward emergency response personnel in the areas of hazardous materials, firefighters, law enforcement, EMS and environmental health.

DPETAP is offering a total of 20 courses and exercises. For example, WMD Detection Technologies is a three-hour course covering the capabilities and limitations of WMD technologies, and the chemical, biological and nuclear/radiological material that can be detected.

Another popular course is Operation and Maintenance, which gives hands-on instruction in the capability, operation and maintenance of such items as the Draeger Civil Defense System, the Photo Ionization Detector MiniRAE Plus, the Ludlum Model 2241-2 Emergency (Radiological) Response Kit, and a number of other chemical detection technologies.

The DPETAP program also offers four 45-minute exercise scenarios that have been tailored to the threat most likely in each jurisdiction. These practical exercises present potential WMD scenarios that require teams to evaluate conditions, and identify and deploy the most

effective detection equipment. Upon completion, the teams present their findings to the class. A group "hot wash" and discussions follow the team presentations.

The courses typically take fewer than 12 participants to ensure a quality educational experience. Also, offering the courses at the first-responder's location decreases the participants' time away from official duties.

### **Ensuring Equipment Readiness**

The second part of DPETAP is its focus on tracking and maintaining PEP's 21,000 pieces of WMD-response equipment. Ensuring this large repository of gear is always ready would normally be a daunting and inexact task. But with the implementation of a specially designed program, equipment is meticulously tracked and maintained using a process called a Quality Assessment Visit (QAV). The QAV responds to the need for guaranteed preparedness and the need to account for a vast quantity of equipment.

The QAV involves annual visits to each site, with three days spent cataloging, inspecting, and testing, and the fourth in a team discussion of the assessment process and identification of areas for improvement. The results are tracked from site to site to identify any trends.

The detail of the inspection is stringent. Documentation is closely examined. Equipment is inspected, tested and catalogued in the PEP asset management database. Throughout the process, the team keeps a detailed log of their findings. Discrepancies in maintenance, upkeep and repair, as well as any manufacturing deficiencies are revealed, thereby identifying potential problems before they become real problems.

One result of DPETAP's work has been the creation of a valuable quality-assurance database of information on almost all types of WMD first responder equipment. This catalog, one of the most extensive repositories of information in the country, can be used as a quick reference by first responders. And because the equipment available through the PEP program is intended as reserve stocks and therefore may sit unused for long periods of time, the DPETAP team has also provided instructions for long-term storage.

### **Nation's Readiness Improved**

The most important element in the nation's ability to respond to a WMD incident is that its first responders are armed with the appropriate equipment. The DPETAP and PEP programs are helping to ensure that this vital element is in place. For more information about DPETAP or WMD detection equipment and technologies, contact the DPETAP Helpline at (800) 232-5741. You can also log on to the ODP Web site at [www.ojp.usdoj.gov/odp](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/odp).

**About the author:** Frank Lepage is a project manager at the Office for Domestic Preparedness.